



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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Fur-sealing operations in the Pribilof Islands, conducted in secrecy this year because of their proximity to military operations, have resulted in a record take of 117,164 skins, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes announced today.

The 1943 take is the largest ever made under Government controlled sealing and represents an increase of 22,151 over 1941 when 95,013 were taken. In the first year of American ownership of the Pribilofs, however, which were bought in 1867 along with Alaska, uncontrolled hunting resulted in a take of 242,000 skins.

Last year only 127 skins were taken as military authorities ordered evacuation of the islands shortly after sealing operations began. The Pribilofs lie in the Bering sea, just north of the Aleutians. The natives were removed by transport to Funtar Bay, 1,500 miles distant and about 50 miles from Juneau in Southeastern Alaska.

The expedition this year, under the leadership of Edward C. Johnston, superintendent of the Pribilof Islands for the Fish and Wildlife Service, left Funtar on May 6 and reached the islands on May 15. About 187 persons comprised the group, including 10 supervisory officials, 40 white employees of the Fouke Fur Company, 113 Pribilof natives, 13 natives evacuated to other places in Southeastern Alaska from the Aleutian Islands, and 7 Pribilof natives who had been inducted into the armed forces in Alaska a few months ago but who were furloughed by the military authorities for the sealing season.

Fur-sealing operations began on June 10 with a take of 829 seals on St. Paul Island and were concluded on August 9, with the total take of 117,164. The natives were returned to Funtar Bay.

The Pribilof Islands--a treeless group of volcanic origin--are the only place where the Alaska fur seals ever seek the shore. St. Paul Island, about 14 miles in length, St. George Island, 12 miles long, and Sea Lion Rock, a small islet adjacent to St. Paul, are the breeding grounds of the North American or Alaska fur-seal herd, which embraces approximately 80 percent of the fur seals of the world. The annual computation made in 1941 indicated 2,338,000 animals in the herd.

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Each year the herd goes to the Pribilof group and there the young are born and spend the first few months of their existence. During the remainder of the year there occurs the annual migration which takes some of the animals as far south as the latitude of southern California, about 3,000 miles from their summer home.

In the annual migration northward, the breeding bulls are the first to reach the islands in the spring where they await the arrival of the females.

Fur-sealing operations occur chiefly in June and July. At that time the family groups or harems occupy the rookeries upon which generally only breeding seals and pups are found. Near these rookeries are the so-called hauling grounds where the unattached bulls and immature males, or bachelors, congregate.

It is from these hauling grounds that the seals selected for killing, chiefly 3-year-olds, are driven inland a short distance. They can be driven almost as easily as a flock of sheep, although more slowly. These driving operations are conducted with extreme care so as not to overheat the animals and thus lessen the value of the pelts.

Rainy or cloudy weather is preferred for the seal killing which is done under the immediate direction of the Fish and Wildlife Service by Aleuts who reside in the villages on St. Paul and St. George Islands.

After the killing, the skins are removed and given a thorough curing in salt for at least 10 days. They are then rolled singly with a generous supply of salt on the flesh side, which is turned inward. Boric acid also is used as a germicide in preserving the skins. From 50 to 100 of the skins are packed to the barrel.

The Government has a contract with the Fouke Fur Company of St. Louis for dressing, dyeing and selling the skins at public auction. There are more than 100 distinct manipulations or treatments involved in the processing of fur-seal skins, each requiring great skill and care. This work is completed in about 60 days and results in the creation of a fine fur that is both exceedingly durable and of great beauty.

For many years all sealskins were dyed black, but in recent years shades of brown have been developed. Two shades are now used; safari brown, a deep chocolate tone, and matara brown, which has a bluish background. A fur-seal coat contains an average of from 6 to 8 skins. This year's take is sufficient for the manufacture of more than 15,000 coats.

After being dressed and dyed, the skins are sold at a public auction held twice a year in St. Louis, and the net proceeds are turned over to the Treasury of the United States.

Since the beginning of the fiscal year 1918, the sum of \$8,700,214 has been turned into the Treasury as net proceeds of the fur-seal industry after payments of money due other governments under sealing treaties. Of this amount \$7,609,747 was derived from the sale of sealskins, \$960,537 from fox skins, and about \$129,930 from miscellaneous items, chiefly fur-seal oil and meal.

The Pribilof Islands, named after Gerassim Pribilof, the Russian navigator who discovered them in 1786, were under Russian management for 81 years until 1867 when the United States bought Alaska and acquired the islands as part of the Territory.

It is probable that before discovery the Pribilof herd may at one time have contained as many as 4 million animals. Records indicate that prior to 1834 about 2 million pelts were taken under Russian auspices, and by that year the herd had become so reduced in numbers that restrictive measures were applied. From 1835 to 1867 about 600,000 pelts were taken at the Pribilof Islands and in this period of restricted killing the herd increased to probably 3 million.

The number of fur seals in the herd when Alaska came into the possession of the United States has been variously estimated at from 2 to 5 million animals. During the seasons of 1868 and 1869, the first two immediately following the purchase of Alaska from Russia, when killing was unrestricted, large numbers were taken by various independent groups.

For a period of 40 years, from May 1, 1870, to May 1, 1910, the right to take fur-seal skins on the Pribilof Islands was leased by the Government to private corporations. The annual take of sealskins under the first lease was frequently in excess of 100,000 and the total for the first 20-year period was 1,977,377. Under the second lease, however, there was only one year--1896--in which the take amounted to as much as 30,000 skins, and the total obtained by the lessee during the 20 years ending May 1, 1910, was 342,651 skins.

The leasing system was discontinued in 1910, and since that time the Alaska fur-seal herd has been administered first by the Secretary of Commerce and now by the Secretary of the Interior through the Fish and Wildlife Service.

When the Government assumed direct control in 1910 and began all sealing operations on its own account, the fur-seal herd numbered only about 130,000 animals. The primary reason for this decrease was the highly wasteful and objectionable practice of pelagic sealing, or the killing of seals in the water, which began as a commercial enterprise about 1882 and reached its maximum in 1894, during which year approximately 61,000 skins were taken at sea by pelagic sealers. Pelagic sealing frequently results in the destruction of not only the female seal, but the death of their pups through starvation.

The question of pelagic sealing in the waters of the North Pacific Ocean was finally settled on July 7, 1911 by an agreement known as the North Pacific Sealing Convention, reached between the United States, Great Britain, Russia and Japan which prohibited the taking of fur seals in those waters.

This treaty, which became effective December 15, 1911, provided for the allotment of 15 percent of the fur-seal skins taken annually on the Pribilof Islands to Canada and a like amount to Japan. Throughout the treaty, Japan took its share in cash, as did Canada until 1933 when that country began taking actual delivery of its share of the skins. The allotment of skins to these Governments was in return for their relinquishment of pelagic sealing in the waters covered by the Convention. The payments under treaty provisions to Japan have amounted to approximately \$1,500,000.

The benefits derived from the Convention are shown by the fact that in the 30 years of direct Government control and operations, from 1921, to 1941, the herd increased about sixteen-fold and during that time about 1,050,000 skins were taken.

The fur-seal treaty of 1911 was abrogated by Japan on October 23, 1941, the Japanese claiming that the seals inflicted both direct and indirect damage on their fishing industry.

Last December a provisional agreement was signed by the United States and Canada, giving this country 10 percent and Canada 5 percent of the 15 percent of skins allotted to Japan, prior to the abrogation of the treaty. This agreement, however, will not become effective until confirmatory legislation is passed by Congress. When it becomes operative, Canada will receive 20 percent of the total take of skins and the United States 80 percent.

Incidental to fur-sealing operations on the islands is the management of blue foxes which roam at large and require feeding only during the winter months. Foxing operations yield an average of about 1,000 pelts each winter which also are sent to St. Louis and sold for the account of the Government.

Another incidental activity is the operation of a byproducts plant on St. Paul Island where carcasses from seals are rendered into oil and meal. Some of the resulting product is retained for fox feed at the Islands, but most of it is sent to the States for sale.